

Showcase NC: Aging with Gusto!

Carol A. Schwab

Editor's Note: I have exercised my editorial prerogative to replace the scheduled Showcase NC in order to announce the receipt of a national award for North Carolina's program, Aging with Gusto! This Showcase NC is not a reviewed article as required by *FFCI's* submission guidelines. A reviewed article on **Aging with Gusto!** can be found in *FFCI* in the [Fall/Winter 1998](#) issue. This article is in the nature of an editorial.

North Carolina's **Aging with Gusto!** Program has received the US Committee's National Award for Excellence in Aging Programs. The award was presented on December 7, 1999 in Washington, D.C. at the conference, "Positive Aging: A Goal for the Next Millennium." The conference was hosted by the United States Committee and the Federal Committee for the UN International year of Older Persons. Twelve programs received the award and were chosen from a pool of nearly 400 applicants.

Aging with Gusto! (AwG!) is a Cooperative Extension Major Program in North Carolina designed to help people age with gusto by teaching them how to achieve optimum financial, physical, and mental well-being in their later years. Adults learn how to prepare for and cope with problems related to finances, legal issues, health, caregiving, housing, and self-care. The programs emphasize that choices made today affect the quality of life as people grow older. All-day extravaganzas attract hundreds of people, many new to Extension's educational services. Some counties are currently planning their 4th annual AwG! Extravaganza.

History of the Program. In 1995, North Carolina Cooperative Extension adopted 20 Cooperative Extension Major Programs (CEMPs) (formerly known as State Major Programs). Teams of specialists and county agents were organized for each CEMP. I was asked to co-chair "Needs of the Aging Population." I envisioned an upbeat and positive programming effort for the CEMP, and I wanted to focus on ways people could improve their later years physically, emotionally, and financially. I envisioned all-day extravaganzas that are fun as well as educational that give a clear message that growing older is not synonymous with growing frail and helpless.

The name of our CEMP, "Needs of the Aging Population," was not going to convey our message. So, the first order of business was a new name, and Dr. Jackie McClelland contributed the name **Aging with Gusto!** It captured our message in three words. Next, we developed the foundation of the program -- the lesson plans for agents to use in organizing the all-day extravaganzas. I invited the Family and Consumer Sciences Specialists to contribute their expertise, and every subject matter area was represented. Over the years we have compiled a training manual which contains over 20 lesson plans. Finally, we trained our county agents how to organize and facilitate the program. Our county agents took our collection of lesson plans and added their creativity, ingenuity, and hard work, and produced successful all-day programs that attract hundreds of people each year.

Issue or Audience? Periodically, there have been rumblings about eliminating AwG! as a CEMP. In the era of issue-based programming in Extension, many argue that AwG! addresses an audience, unlike the other 19 CEMPs which address issues. Actually, AwG! addresses both. Positive aging is the thrust of our programming efforts, and it is our issue. At the same time, we have an audience of primarily older adults.[\[1\]](#)

What makes AwG! different from the other 19 CEMPs, in my opinion, is the fact that it is an interdisciplinary effort. AwG! is the first programming effort in our organization, to my knowledge, where every subject matter of Family and Consumer Sciences is represented. For people to achieve the optimum life style in their later years, they need to learn

- how to stay healthy with exercise, good nutrition, medical screenings, safe food handling, and environmental safeguards,
- how to make the most of their finances;
- how to make legal decisions;
- how to dress to increase their self-esteem and confidence;
- how to make their homes more accessible as they grow older, and
- how to change the negative stereotypical images of growing older.

The program's interdisciplinary nature, which is its greatest strength, is also the cause of its greatest criticism. North Carolina has an electronic reporting system (ERS) that county agents use to report their activities for the year. Agents report against measures of progress and impacts developed by each CEMP team to reflect the issues addressed by the CEMP. Many of the issues addressed in AwG! overlap the issues addressed by other CEMPs. Because there is no double

reporting under ERS, agents have to decide where to report their activities, resulting in a skewed report.

For example, suppose a county conducts a program teaching older adults about finances. Should this activity be reported under AwG!'s objective to help make a person's later years more financially secure? Or, should it be reported under CEMP 08, Family and Consumer Economics? Agents must choose, and during the course of a year, both CEMPs lose impact data.

Understandably, agents and CEMP co-chairs are frustrated, and some suggest that the solution is to eliminate AwG! as a CEMP, and fold it into the other CEMPs according to issue. An action which, in my opinion, would fragment and destroy the program. Others suggest changing the ERS so that agents would report under issues, rather than CEMPs. Naturally, I favor the latter suggestion. This solution would streamline the system, eliminating the problem of overlap between CEMPs. It is my hope that the receipt of a national award will lay to rest further discussion of eliminating AwG! as a CEMP.

The Team Effort. AwG! is truly a team effort. I was privileged to have led the team for more than four years, and I am gratified that the hard work of so many people has been recognized with a national award. The award is shared by many people, and I would like to give special thanks to the following.

- To the Extension Specialists who contributed their time and expertise in the development of the lesson plans:
 - Janice Holm Lloyd who provided expertise in financial management issues, and who laid the foundation for **Aging with Gusto!** with her earlier program, "Planning Ahead for Elder Care;"
 - Dr. Luci Bearon who provided the expertise in positive aging and caregiving issues;
 - Dr. Barbara Garland who provided expertise in health issues;
 - Dr. Jackie McClelland and Dr. Angie Fraser who provided the expertise in food and nutrition and food safety;
 - Dr. Wilma Hammett, Dr. Sarah Kirby, and Sandy Wiggins who provided the expertise in housing issues, including accessible housing, universal design, appliance safety, and indoor air quality;

- Dr. Judy Mock and Ellen Miller who provided expertise in apparel and textiles, and
- Dr. Wayne Matthews who often shared his wit and humor as a motivational speaker at the all-day extravaganzas.
- To the administration for providing funds to support the programming efforts.
- To the many agencies, community colleges, and other organizations who partnered with our county centers to produce the all-day extravaganzas.
- Last, but not least, to the county Family and Consumer Educators who made the vision a reality. They are the ones who made the program a success, and they deserve the lion's share of the credit for this award. Salute!

After four years of providing leadership to AwG!, I resigned as co-chair on June 1, 1999, along with my co-chair Ila Parker, a Family and Consumer Educator from Martin County. Dr. Luci Bearon, a gerontologist on our faculty, and Evelyn DeLoatch, a Family and Consumer Educator from Alamance County, are the new co-chairs. They have formed a new team of specialists and county agents, and I look forward to seeing the program further develop under their leadership.

Note 1: We know that the message of AwG! is better learned by younger adults who could benefit the most by making wise life style choices now. But, experience shows that the consumers of our AwG! programs are primarily senior citizens. How to reach younger adults with this message is a problem to tackle in the future. [\[Return to text.\]](#)

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